

Lennon and Steinhoff, An Introduction

Jonathan David Steinhoff, ©8/18/07

In honor of the announcement this week that the 1974 John Lennon album, "Walls and Bridges", is joining the world of iTunes (if I may say, iTunes makes the songs I've personally done sound considerably worse than if you were to hear them thru Quicktime), I present here a breakdown, on a certain plane, of certain things on that John Lennon recording.

To appreciate this dissemination as something more significant than crazy/absurd connections, one would first have to be aware of my secret and great importance in relation to Spielberg, McCartney, Lennon, and others. Even then, the idea that secret things are contained in this Lennon work is an impossible concept for many, who tend to think that Lennon wasn't the kind to do anything secretly, let alone put secrets in his music. Such minds have my permission to leave the room here. And just for that I won't fill anybody in on Lennon's "Double Fantasy" - or perhaps I will just leave that for another day.

Though I cannot be certain of the proper order in which to present my information, the important thing to me is that the information be presented such that, at least perhaps by the end of the next millennium, it is appreciated that these are "fragments" that should be seen together, and that they are not being forced together here. Meanwhile, one can expect that in the present much of this information is likely to be pulled apart, mangled, chewed up and spit out in a cliché'd, stupid and/or corrupt way.

On the eighth track of "Walls and Bridges", the song "Surprise, Surprise" contains the line "Sweet as the smell of success". I note that the 1950s movie classic, "The Sweet Smell Of Success", stars Burt Lancaster as a columnist for a well known New York city newspaper. On the third track, the song "Old Dirt Road" contains the line, "Can you Rainmaker too?" You would not be going out on a limb were you to say that Burt Lancaster comes to mind in relation to the word Rainmaker, owing to his having starred in a movie by that name (it generally not being a very common word).

In the Summer of 1974 when "Walls and Bridges" came out, I was on a break from college. The dean of the school I was attending at that time, California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) School of Film/Video, was Alexander "Sandy" MacKendrick, who directed the movie, "The Sweet Smell of Success" (a year later my friend became MacKendrick's Teacher Assistant). While I was on break from CalArts in the Summer of 1974 I worked for Howard Smith, a good friend of Lennon's who was also a columnist for the Village Voice, a well known New York City newspaper (a match, then, for the Lancaster role in "Sweet Smell").

When Lennon first came to live in New York City several years earlier in the Summer of 1971, a highly publicized-by-Lennon event, it was Howard Smith who showed Lennon and Ono around, introducing Lennon to Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman and others who came to comprise an important part of Lennon's life at that time. They were even planning to stage a protest in San Diego of the 1972 Republican National Convention in San Diego, which, according to documents now made public, was the subject of correspondence around that time of correspondence between President Nixon and Attorney General John Mitchell, wherein they designed for this reason to have Lennon deported on the pretext of a previous marijuana conviction. Lennon's fight against deportation was much higher profile than the revelation years later of the Nixon-Mitchell correspondence pertaining to same.

I worked for Howard Smith answering the telephone for his film production company, "High Wire Productions", which was involved in making a movie called, "Gizmo". Burt Lancaster might not be the first person who comes to mind when one thinks of "High Wire Productions", but biographically it is significant that, in addition to starring in the movie, "Trapeze", about a circus high wire performer, Lancaster's movie career was preceded by his being an acrobat in a circus in real life. Therefore, Lancaster's starring role in "Trapeze" is regarded as having a unique significance in the story of Burt Lancaster.

At the beginning of the ninth track on "Walls and Bridges", "Steel and Glass", Lennon says, "This is a story about your friend and mine." He then speaks of someone with a New York walk and talk and an L.A. tan. Those who have heard Howard Smith speak will notice Lennon doing an impression of Howard following the line, "born at all". Howard Smith would go back and forth between New York City and LA frequently, in fact, he occasionally brought back little gifts for the five people who worked in the office – I received a roach clip as a small gift. He would also bring back licorice root for everyone to chew on.

In listening to "Steel and Glass", if you didn't know any "better", it easily sounds as if Lennon is saying, "Stealing Glass", except - why would he. Well, I knew someone beginning from when we were in the fourth grade together in Princeton, New Jersey, who during high school became a heroin addict, or so the story went. To support his habit he became involved in a heist of glass from a glass store. This same individual who was arrested for stealing glass used to lead everyone in gym class in chanting, "Heh! Heh! Heh! Heh!" (which was very disturbing to the gym teacher, but I digress). Lennon in the song "Steel and Glass" also goes, "Heh, heh heh heh, heh heh heh heh, heh heh heh" at the end of the song, though not in the identical rhythm, intonation or manner. It should not be impossible to imagine that a character in a Lennon song is the composite of several people, a common practice in fiction writing.

Though Lennon was not known to hide out while living in New York City, I knew only two people who happened to see Lennon go by (other than Howard Smith or David Peel, or the kids in my small private high school from when I moved to New York City in the

Summer of 1971 who occasionally hung out in Lennon's home in the afternoon): my sister and a friend. This friend who saw Lennon was the person who had once introduced me to beef jerky. Thus that which I associate with "Beef Jerky", the title of the tenth track on "Walls and Bridges", includes my friend whom Lennon walked by. I might add that I find there to be a distinct similarity between the nature of beef jerky and that of the licorice root Howard Smith occasionally showed up with (what other food do you chew on like that?).

Going back to the roach clip Howard Smith gave me, the third song on "Walls and Bridges", entitled "Old Dirt Road", includes the line, "Try to shovel smoke with a pitchfork...."

And here I have to point to things that are subject to debate (not that what I've said up to this point couldn't also be debated, especially by those who believe the very existence of an actor named Burt Lancaster is a figment of my imagination).

In the opening track on "Walls and Bridges", "Going Down On Love", the idea of the persona of the first person singular is that he must be so pure an entity as to resurrect love itself, a task that is more likely to be designated to a John Lennon than to 99.99% of the rest of us. In the second track, "Whatever Gets You Through The Night", the idea of the persona of the first person singular is now someone who you don't necessarily feel should be trusted. He sings, "Hold me darlin' come on listen to me, I won't do you no harm, Trust me darlin' come on listen to me." The character is perhaps trying to connive his way into getting some action. Another line from that song, "Bet your money or your life, it's alright", is also disingenuous. Therefore the second song has a thematic relationship with the first song, involving different ends of the same spectrum.

One of the things that takes place in the movie, "The Sweet Smell Of Success", is that a musician's reputation is seriously tarnished when he is found to be in possession of marijuana. In the context of this 1950s movie, because the musician's reputation is thusly damaged, his integrity, purity, trustworthiness, etc. are also called into question.

And now we leave it for you to keep these fragments of information from getting separated, to see them as belonging together. To paraphrase a statement Lennon once made in an interview (I wish I could recall it well enough to quote verbatim), things whole presented in fragment form that require your re-assemblage escape a certain kind of targeting and thusly stand a better chance of survival. I would add to this by stating the obvious: that there comes a time for it to come together, for it to be put together.